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BOYS' LIFE is published monthly by the Boy Scouts of America, North Brunswick, N.J. 08902, 40 cents a copy, \$4.00 a year. Add 75 cents for Canada, Central and South America. \$1.00 for all other foreign sub-scriptions. Special rates, to members of the Boy Scouts of America, through local council offices. Second-class postage paid at North Brunswick, N.J. and at additional mailing offices (PM 132-25 section g). Accepted for special postage provided for in 1103, Act of October, 1917, June 13, 1938, November, 1958. Volume LXI, No. 11. © 1971 by the Boy Scouts of America. All rights thereof America. All rights thereunder reserved; anything appearing in Boys' Life may not be reprinted either wholly or in part without permission. Send stamped, self-addressed envelopes with unsolicited manuscripts. Boys' Life will not be responsible for manuscripts in its office or in transit. Postmaster: Send form 3579 to Boys' Life, North Brunswick, N.J. 08902.

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## The Liechtenstein Toe

By JACK RITCHIE

y mother passed the mashed potatoes to Ludwig. "Isn't Liechtenstein always neutral whenever there's trouble in Europe?"

Ludwig nodded. "Especially since 1868, when we abolished our army, which at that time consisted of 45 men."

Ludwig Oppermann is this year's exchange student from Liechtenstein and he just got in this morning. He's boarding with our family, which consists of me, my mother, and my father.

Every year Stevenson High sends one of its students over to this Liechtenstein Gymnasium—which is what they call a high school—and they send back one of theirs.

Liechtenstein is about 65 square miles, mostly mountains, located between Austria and Switzerland, and has a population of around 19,000. Its capital is a town spelled Vaduz and pronounced Vadoots.

Looking at Ludwig, you couldn't tell him from any American. The first Liechtensteiner to come here wore lederhosen, but they've learned a lot since then.

"How far are we from the nearest football field?" Ludwig asked.

"Three blocks," I said.

Ludwig smiled. "I am a kicker."

So we looked at him.

He tapped his forehead. "I have an analytical mind. When I was informed that I was to be this year's exchange student, I realized that, as a loyal Liechtenstein ambassador of goodwill, I must be prepared to participate in American sports, which is football at this time of the year, no?"

"Ted is a left halfback on the team,"

my mother said.

Dad corrected her. "Right halfback." She nodded. "Something like that. Anyway, he runs for daylight."

Ludwig nodded in my direction. "Good thinking."

Last year I was 17th leading ground gainer in the Fox Valley Conference. So far nobody's asked me for my autograph.

Ludwig buttered his bread. "And since I have never played football, American version, I studied the game through the Encyclopaedia Britannica, of which we have a set in the town hall."

"Ted fumbled only nine times last year," my mother said. "Never more than once a game, except that time with Cumberland High."

"I hear you got a lot of mountains in

If you come from Europe and you play football, you're a kicker, right? Maybe even like Ludwig!

Liechtenstein," I said quickly. "Ever climb any?"

"One," Ludwig said.

I admired him. "It must take a lot of courage to go up a mountain."

Ludwig agreed. "But it takes a lot more to come down. That is where 90 percent of the accidents occur." He got back to football. "So I determined that I would excel in one aspect of this game, and I chose kicking. You are aware that a number of your professional football teams employ soccer-type kickers from Europe and similar continents?"

"Of course," my mother said. "There's Charley Gogolak, to mention a few." She frowned for a moment. "Or is it his brother, the other Gogolak?"

"In soccer, we do not kick the ball with the toe or the forefoot," Ludwig said. "At least very seldom. We kick with the instep, which allows us better control with the ball. Therefore I sold my goat and bought 10 footballs."

"Goat?" my mother said.

Ludwig nodded. "It was not too much of a sacrifice. I do not like goat's milk anyway."

"Ten footballs?" I said.

"Yes. I would have gotten an even dozen, except that in Liechtenstein we operate under the decimal system."

It was my father's turn. "Huh?" he said.

"Simply to kick one football about an area is not economical of time," Ludwig said. "When you kick this one ball, you must retrieve it before you can kick again. However, with 10 footballs, you may kick 10 times and must retrieve only once. Therefore I ordered 10 American footballs from The Liechtenstein Imports Catalogue. Also I purchased a wheelbarrow."

My father blinked. "Wheelbarrow?"
Ludwig smiled. "One cannot retrieve
10 footballs and carry them under his
arm. One must have a wheelbarrow."

"Of course," my father said. "I wasn't thinking."

"I brought along the 10 footballs." Ludwig tapped his forehead again. "Of course I deflated them before I packed my luggage. Do you happen to have a wheelbarrow?"

We didn't, but we did have a garden cart.

After supper, we still had another hour or so of daylight, so Ludwig and I carted the 10 footballs over to the service station, where we used the air hose to inflate them.

We went on to the high-school practice field.

It was deserted, everybody either still eating supper or watching TV inside, so Ludwig and I had the place to ourselves.

Ludwig placed the 10 footballs on the 15-yard line before the goalposts and began kicking them, one by one.

He missed going over the crossbar seven times out of 10.

Ludwig cleared his throat. "This is the first time I have practiced before actual goalposts and a crossbar. In Liechtenstein I used the soccer net and my imagination."

We gathered up the footballs with the cart and lined them up again.

This time he missed eight out of 10. "How long have you been practicing kicking?" I asked.

"Two months."

He kicked another 10 footballs, not getting any better.

"How good were you at this in Liechtenstein?" I asked.

He rubbed his neck. "About the same."
Ten more footballs came and went.

"Ludwig," I said. "Did you play soccer in Liechtenstein?"

He tossed a football into the cart. "Actually I did not indulge in athletics at all in Liechtenstein. I was more academically inclined."

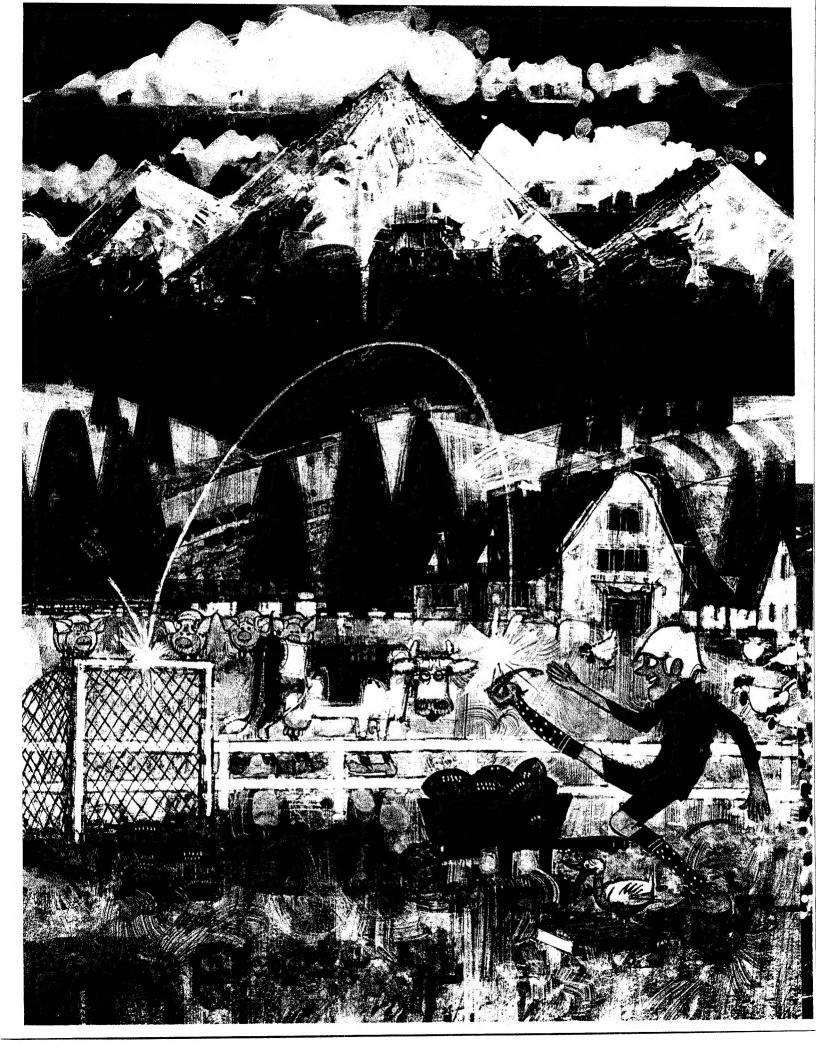
He took the cart back to the 15-yard line. "However, it is simply a matter of practice. Soon I will break through the skill barrier. It will probably come suddenly, like the snapping of fingers."

We quit when it began getting dark. If he was going to break through the skill barrier, this wasn't the day.

When we got home, I said, "I'll put the balls in the garage. You go right on into the house."

I waited until he was inside

"Simply to kick one football about an area is not economical of time," Ludwig said.



and then put one of the footballs on the ground.

Now how did he do it?

I took a couple of steps and booted the ball with my instep.

I didn't expect it to go that far.

Right over the garage and the alley and on into Mr. Sorrenson's yard.

It took a little hunting in the dark, but I finally found the football in Mr. Sorrenson's flower patch.

Luckily, I know his dog.

Ludwig got up before daylight the next day. It turned out that he preferred to do his kicking early when everybody was asleep and no kibitzers were around.

I went with him the first few mornings, but then on Wednesday, I let him go off alone.

As soon as he was out of sight, I took my own football and biked two miles across town to the junior-high athletic field.

I began booting the ball, soccer style, and I liked the feel of it. And the control.

I tried kicking for the point after

Under the circumstances, nobody would have blamed Ludwig if he'd fallen on the ball.

touchdown and I made seven out of 10. Not bad for the first time.

I tried again and made eight out of 10.

If I was this good to begin with, how
much better would I get to be with a lit-

tle practice?

I kept booting, and Ludwig was right.

It sure is uneconomical to have to go shagging after one ball after every kick. But on the other hand, I was way overdrawn on my allowance, and I didn't have any goat to sell.

I got back home a little before Ludwig. Somehow I didn't think I ought to tell him what I'd been doing.

The fall term started that Monday, and when Coach Franconi called the first meeting of the football squad, I brought Ludwig with me.

Coach Franconi, who also teaches chemistry, beamed. "Good. I always like to see a Liechtensteiner on our team. You have quite a tradition to uphold there, young man. We all remember that immortal back, Emerich Kriedermann, and that All-Conference guard, Dietrich Frohmader, and the absolutely fabulous Crazylegs Bentheimer."

"I am a kicker," Ludwig said. "Of field

goals and points after touchdowns."

"Excellent," Coach Franconi said.
"Liechtenstein has provided us with a lot of good kickers in the past. Who can forget—once having seen him—the legendary Heinrich Buchholz?"

Heinrich Buchholz was the one who came here wearing the lederhosen.

We didn't suit up and get onto the field until the next day.

Coach Franconi wandered over to where Ludwig was practicing his kicking. He watched for a while, and when I happened to be in the vicinity, snagging a pass, he spoke up.

"Ludwig seems a little rusty."

"It's probably all those time zones he crossed to get here," I said. "I hear that upsets some people."

I was about to tell him, though, where he could get a real good kicker, cheap, but, watching Ludwig, I just didn't have the heart. I mean, here he came all the way from Liechtenstein, so eager, and kicking was the only thing he had.

I went back to the other end of the field.

To tell the truth, I've never been real wild about being a halfback. But my



father was a halfback, his father was a halfback, and his father before him. It's hard to ruin a string like that.

If you rated halfbacks, I think I'd probably get a C-plus or a B-minus—good enough to make the team, but not good enough to get your picture in the paper except by accident.

Ludwig did improve a little in the next two weeks, and Coach Franconi decided that he might as well make him our kicker, there not being anybody else on the team who was better—as far as he knew.

Our first game of the season was with Park Falls, our traditional deadly rival. Actually all of the teams in the Fox Valley Conference are our deadly rivals, but we like to take our deadly rivals one at a time so that we don't get overloaded with stress.

We won that game, 12-0, scoring two touchdowns. Ludwig missed both points after, not to mention a 20-yard field-goal try in the third quarter.

We took our second game, too. It was with Richfield, 25-7. Ludwig missed three tries for the extra point, but he did convert on our last touchdown.

During the week, Ludwig kept up the early-morning practice, and so did I—at the junior-high field.

I was making nine out of 10 consistently, and sometimes 10 out of 10.

The night before the game with Palmyra, I had this dream.

The stands were packed and the crowd roaring. There were only 10 seconds left to play and we were behind by one point, and a field goal was the only way we could win.

So Coach Franconi points to Ludwig on the bench, and Ludwig nods and runs out onto the field for the kick. Only he runs slow-motion and just as he gets onto the field, he trips over this hassock.

What the hassock was doing there, I don't know, but that's how dreams work.

As he fell, still slow-like, I could definitely see that he was going to break his leg.

I woke up. Not exactly in a cold sweat, but feeling guilty about that broken leg.

After a while I fell asleep again, and this dream came back. Only this time when Ludwig tripped over the hassock, he just sprained his ankle.

I felt better about that.

So this time Coach Franconi points at me, and I knew he was depending on me to make the field goal.

I moved out onto the field, flowing gracefully over the hassock, and Ludwig still lying there.

And when the ball came back and was put on the ground, I slowly kicked it over the crossbar, giving us the Conference title and a bid to the Orange Bowl.

So much for my dream.

On Saturday, the team took the bus to Palmyra.

We won the toss, and O'Malley, our left halfback, and I dropped back to take the kickoff.

The ball was booted long to O'Malley's side of the field and five yards into the end zone.

If it had gone to my side, I would have downed it and gotten our first down on the 20-yard line. But O'Malley is a fast man and an optimist, and he decided to run with the ball. He was lucky to get to the seven-yard line before he got swarmed under.

On first down, we tried the usual (Continued on page 62)





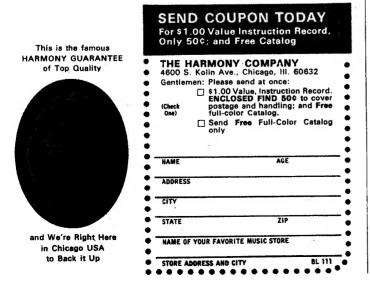


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### Liechtenstein Toe

conservative off-tackle smash to see if we could get a little farther from the shadow of our own goalposts. Rowan, our fullback, picked up only two yards.

On second and eight, Olson called for a sweep.

I took the ball on the handoff and followed my blockers to the right. I could see after half a dozen steps that I wasn't going to be able to turn the corner. So I cut inside, hoping mainly to get to the line of scrimmage before I got pulled down.

I must have been the only one on the field who thought I would do that, because suddenly, there it was . . .

Daylight.

To the right of me, Palmyra players were still trying to pivot and reverse their direction, and to the left of me most of the Palmyra line was still sitting on the ground where the line action had put it.

So I ran.

Just plain running and straight ahead. I passed the 20-yard stripe, the 30, the 40, and then over the midfield.

The wind rushed in my ears, or maybe that was the roar of the crowd.

I kept lifting them up and putting them down, expecting any second to get tackled from behind.

I got past the Palmyra 30-yard line, the 20, the 10.

And then I carried the football across the goal line.

A touchdown!

There it was. Ninety-one yards from scrimmage. Something I'd never done before—or even gotten close to doing.

I tossed the football high into the crowd.

I looked back.

Both teams were still at the other end of the field.

I trotted back there to find that the play had been nullified because some idiot—whose name I will not mention—had been offside. Not only that, but the referee wanted to know what I was going to do about getting the football back from the crowd.

Luckily it had been caught by an usher, who almost quit his job when he learned that he would have to return the ball.

After a while we resumed play with the ball on our four-yard line. We got nowhere on two downs and punted.

Palmyra brought the ball back to our 40, but we held.

It was like that all of the first quarter, most of the action taking place between the 30-yard markers.

In the second quarter, Palmyra broke into the scoring column when their quarterback threw a bomb to their right end for a 58-yard touchdown play. They made the conversion and led, 7-0.

And then with only one minute of the half remaining, O'Malley broke through on an end-around and scampered 26 yards for the TD.

Ludwig missed the conversion, and we walked into the locker room at the half trailing 7-6.

Coach Franconi went over our mistakes, of which there were a few, and then with about 10 minutes to go before we were due on the field again, he went into his fight speech.

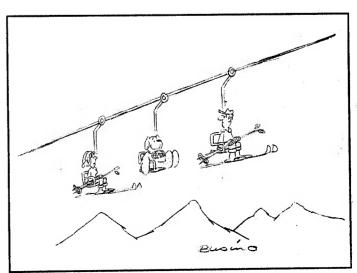
He went at it pretty good and really got through, especially to Ludwig, who jumped up. "Death to the enemy!"

We looked at him.

He sat down. "I was speaking figuratively, of course."

So we went back onto the field full of fight and kicked off to Palmyra.

There was no scoring in the third quarter, but early in the fourth we put together a drive that carried us 60 yards, with me going off right tackle to pick



up the last two and a touchdown. That made it 12-7, our favor.

Ludwig missed the extra point, this time putting the ball between the goalposts, but under the crossbar.

The score might have ended that way, but unfortunately, the next time we got the ball. I fumbled on our 37-yard line—something that could happen to anybody—and Palmyra recovered.

Palmyra ground out the yardage, a few at a time, and every third down a crucial one for them. Finally their fullback plunged over his line into the end zone to score. They made the point after, which put the score at 14-12 in their favor and only about a minute to go.

I took the kick and managed to carry it back all the way to our 45.

Time began eating away, and finally there we were, on Palmyra's 27, fourth down and eight, with some 20 seconds left to play.

Coach Franconi decided to play the percentages, the percentages being that one of these days Ludwig was going to connect with a field goal, and it might as well be today.

I watched as Ludwig trotted out onto the field, but there wasn't any hassock, for him to fall over, and he joined us in the huddle. The referee blew his whistle, and we went into our formation. I got down on one knee to place the ball for Ludwig.

It came back, but it was way too high. So high that even Ludwig's jump couldn't bring it down. It bounded off his fingertips.

Ludwig began chasing the ball. It took a lot of bad bounces, and when Ludwig finally caught up with it, he was back on our 40-yard line.

He turned and saw what must have seemed like the entire Palmyra team charging down on him.

The simple thing to do would have been to fall on the

ball and nobody would have blamed him.

Maybe he wasn't thinking at all—he looked a little surprised to be holding the ball—or maybe it was just self-preservation, but he swung a hip aside just in time to let a big Palmyra tackler brush past. He did another hop, skip, and jiggle, and another tackler hit the sod, holding nothing but air.

Ludwig began running.

I woke up in time to block out one of the Palmyra players and then, lying there on the field, I watched Ludwig scamper, and he did scamper.

It was a thing of beauty, like Keats—or somebody—said in sophomore English.

This was Ludwig the Runner,

doing something that he'd never known he could do before.

He broke into the end zone for the score, still looking surpised. He stood there, staring at his feet as though they'd just been introduced.

I wondered if—because of all those mountains in Liechtenstein—he'd ever before had a chance to run on flat ground and find out how fast he could really go.

That's how the game ended, 18-14 (Ludwig missed the try for the extra point).

Back in the locker room, from the gleam in the coach's eyes, I could see that he had lost a kicker, but gained a halfback.

I waited until the next day to tell him that he had also lost a

helfback and gained a kicker. Namely me.

We went through our eightgame season without a loss. Ludwig, our new right halfback, broke Crazylegs Bentheimer's conference rushing record by 53 yards.

I didn't quite break the conference record for field goals—having missed the first three games as a kicker had something to do with that—but I think I could do it next season.

Only I won't be here.

When Ludwig leaves, I'm going with him as our exchange student, and we'll both be seniors in his Gymnasium.

I'm looking forward to having a try at this game of soccer.

